

Engaging Communities to Enhance Physical Activity Among Urban Youth

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INTRODUCTION

Obesity is a significant health concern in the United States. In 2012, more than one-third of all U.S. children and adolescents were obese or overweight. Obesity is a multifaceted problem, however, a sedentary lifestyle is a major contributor to this national health issue. Urban youth have been shown to be less physically active than rural youth. Supportive physical activity (PA) environments, such as recreational facilities, sidewalks, bike lanes, and traffic patterns have been positively associated with youth PA behaviors within urban settings. As part of a Socio-Ecological intervention to improve PA behavior, the Physical Activity Resource Assessment (PARA), the Active Neighborhood Checklist (ANC), and focus groups were used to assess the PA influences within an urban middle school and surrounding community.

OBJECTIVE

Using baseline data from a multi-state project targeting obesity in 6th-8th graders entitled, "Ignite: Sparking Youth to Create Healthy Communities" in Ohio, Kansas, and South Dakota to offer findings related to PA influences at one urban middle school in Ohio and discuss implications for engaging communities to enhance PA among youth.

METHODS

The target community was a low-income, urban Junior High School and surrounding community (est. 20,000) embedded within a medium-size Midwestern City (pop. 65,000). Nearly all students (98.5%) qualified for free and reduced-priced lunch. School enrollment consisted of 175 students, predominately 72% African American.

Measuring the PA Environment

- A PA environmental audit was conducted within a one-mile radius of the school. Rundle et al. suggests this is a reasonable walking distance within urban communities.
- The *Physical Activity Resource Assessment* (PARA) was used to assess the built environment within the community by rating venues on their features, amenities, and incivilities.
- The *Active Neighborhood Checklist* (ANC) assessed key street-level features of the neighborhood environment that may be related to PA. Features include land use, public transportation, street characteristics, environmental quality, and walkability/bike ability of the streets.

Measuring Perceptions of PA

- Six *Focus groups* were conducted following the PARA and ANC assessments, which were used to assess the perceptions among adults (teachers and parents) and 6th-8th grade students regarding the PA environment, as well as other socio-ecological influences.
- Questions measured perceptions of behaviors, personal characteristics and environmental factors that influence PA among students.
- Individual influences (PA preferences), interpersonal influences (e.g., parent and peer influences), and environmental influences (e.g., school) on adolescent health were assessed.

Table 1. Demographics of Adult Focus Groups

| Focus Group (FG) | Gender | Ethnicity | # |
|------------------|------------|--|----|
| FG 1 - Teachers | 80% Female | 40% African American 60% Caucasian | 5 |
| FG 2 - Parents | 75% Female | 75% African American 25% Hispanic | 4 |
| FG 3 - Parents | 69% Female | 78% African American 8% Hispanic 14% Caucasian | 13 |

Table 2. Demographics of Youth Focus Groups

| Focus Group (FG) | Gender | Ethnicity | # |
|------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|----|
| FG 1 | 60% Female | 90% African American 10% Hispanic | 10 |
| FG 2 | 100% Female | 80% African American 20% Caucasian | 5 |
| FG 3 | 100% Female | 100% African American | 4 |



RESULTS

Physical Activity Environmental Assessments-

The environmental assessments suggested the surrounding community not to be supportive of PA. One park within the delineated area was found for audit with the PARA. The park had 3 out of 13 features to accommodate different types of PA. The park was in relatively good condition, having several amenities (8 of 12) including lighting, benches, drinking fountains, bathrooms, etc. 1 incivility, graffiti on the bathroom walls was observed.

For the ANC, the mean score for the street segment sample was 24.55 out of 59 for PA. Thus, the streets that were sampled scored on average very low in terms of walkability as determined by the researchers.



Figure 1. Perceptions of Physical Activity: Focus Group Subthemes

Barriers to Youth PA

Teacher & Parent Socio-Ecological Subthemes:

Intrapersonal: Youth do not understand risk of inactivity, easier/more fun to be sedentary.
Organizational: Lack of sports & activities, especially for those not athletically inclined
Communal: cost, crime in the neighborhood, and transportation concerns.

Youth Socio-Ecological Subthemes:

Interpersonal: Friends and family prefer sedentary activities.
Organizational: Gym class is perceived as too academic, and not fun
Communal: Concerns about crime in neighborhood.

Supports to Youth PA

Teacher & Parent Socio-Ecological Subthemes:

Organizational: After school activities that encourage PA
Communal: Opportunities outside of school, such as dance classes.
Communal: Events that encourage PA, such as Relay for Life.

Youth Socio-Ecological Subthemes:

Communal: Community centers for YMCA.

Common Youth PA

Teacher & Parent Socio-Ecological Subthemes:

Communal: Unstructured activities, like playing outside. Additionally, extracurricular activities, including dance and organized sports.

Youth Socio-Ecological Subthemes:

Organizational: Extracurricular activities, such as volleyball, basketball, and football
Communal: Unstructured activities, such as jump rope and dancing.

CONCLUSIONS

Focus group perceptions added insight beyond the PA environmental assessment (PARA and ANC). Although objective assessments demonstrated low access to PA, crime was the major concern among focus group participants. Focus groups also suggested that there was a lack of non-competitive opportunities sponsored by the school, such as dance.

Building or improving parks and sidewalks might be an important and sustainable goal to enhance the community and encourage PA. However, this could be very costly. Addressing crime or perceptions of crime might be needed prior to any expensive long-range plans. Safe routes to School, or Walk to School Day events might raise awareness and action around these topics. Additionally, less costly and achievable goals for the school and community include improving gym class, sponsoring scholarships, and exposing youth of a variety of PA opportunities. Offering transportation to community centers, like the YMCA, and events may enhance PA among urban youth.



REFERENCES

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